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ABSTRACT

The advent of low cost, easy to use half-inch videotape systems, and the burgeoning of cable television operations throughout the continent have given teachers and children two very powerful tools which allow the students to explore the community and also give the community fresh insights into the lives of children from the point of view of the children themselves. Teachers can help their students explore the community environment by using basic sources of information, like the local newspaper, town community center, television station, radio. The information which these sources provide can be gathered, organized, and reported through the use of a video Portapak, a small television studio, or both by task forces of children. Cable television is generally an easily accessible, convenient vehicle for broadcast of completed videotapes. A list of the equipment that the task forces of children will need for their program is included. (Author/SH)

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TELEVISION: A VEHICLE FOR COMMUNITY-BASED ENVIRONMENTAL LEARNING

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Television: A Vehicle for Community-Based Environmental Learning

School and the environment

Among the most powerful environmental influences that play on children is television. The typical child is fully familiar with a wide variety of television programming before he is even aware of school's existence. More than half his pre-school waking day is spent before a television set, and once he begins attending school, TV still claims more of his time than

the classroom. Dr. Gerald Looney, a pediatrician and Physician-in-Chief at the Kennedy Memorial Hospital in Boston, is alarmed. "The implications of these figures (on the relationship of children to television) are staggering," he claims. "Within two short decades the historical primacy of parents and teachers in the ecology of childhood has been solidly and silently usurped by this electronic invader."

Dr. Looney's comments reflect a common tendency to view the environment as a mosaic of separate phenomena rather than as an integrated whole. It is true that television as it is usually used by children is "an invader." But the same could be said of school or the family. By themselves, each detracts from other facets of the child's life. Only recently, and primarily at the elementary levels, has there been any significant recognition by educators that a child's life is a delicately-balanced unit comprising the whole range of experience. Schools which translate this recognition into practice are still unusual. It might even be argued that the majority of schools are so archaic in their assumptions and practices that we should increase the television viewing hours of children and eliminate school entirely. Obviously this is a ridiculous

proposition. No school is all bad; nor is television completely harmful. Because it is generally recognized, however, that both are in need of improvement, and that neither connect themselves sufficiently with the daily lives of the children they influence, we ought to be drawing on the best thinking in education and the possibilities offered by the newer television technology so that integration of both with the community can be promoted and the learning experiences of children enriched.

A growing number of elementary schools in North America are attempting to involve themselves more actively in the affairs of their communities and base their curricula on the out-of-school experiences of their pupils by adopting the practices of the open classroom. The assumptions underlying these practices might be stated as follows: Children should actively manipulate the tools of learning; they should share in the shaping of their environments; their school environments should reflect and build on outside experience; respect for a child's work should be demonstrated by public display; the curriculum develops from the child's individual needs, inclinations and prior activities. Applied to television, these assumptions

indicate clearly that children should create their own television programs based on their interests, their personal lives and their school work. They further suggest that these programs be given the widest possible community exposure through whatever channels of dissemination are available.

Television is not what it used to be. The advent of low cost, easy to use half-inch videotape systems, and the burgeoning of cable television operations throughout the continent have given teachers and children two very powerful tools, not only for the exploration of the community by pupils but also to give the community fresh insights into the lives of children from the point of view of the children themselves. A project at the University of Massachusetts, called Children's Video Theatre, has, under my direction, been working with nine, ten and eleven year old children helping them do just this. These children still use television in conventional ways; that is, they still watch the Partridge Family, but they are actively using television as a tool, within the framework of their schools, to relate to their communities more concretely.

Exploring the community environment with television

How does the teacher know where to begin to help his pupils explore their communities with television? The basic sources of information are infinite: the daily local newspaper, the town community center, a local TV station, radio, an historical site, a construction site, a hospital, another school. These few starting points contain more information in themselves than could ever be managed by as few as thirty-odd people. They often lead to even more information. Most of this information can be gathered, organized and reported through the use of a video portapak, a small TV studio, or both.

Let us take, for example, the newspaper. A headline from a recent issue of the Toronto Star reads, HOW METRO CONSUMERS FIGHT RISING FOOD COSTS: USE IMAGINATION. A low interest topic for children? Hardly. This article reports that one mother has stopped buying meat altogether; it goes on to say that "Mrs. Mason's children, four boys and a girl . . . are not too enthused." The inflationary food cost spiral affects all but the very rich, and can provide a theme around which a child-produced video documentary can be created. In a classroom, children can be assigned to specific

tasks and grouped for special purposes in ways that will make the documentary a success, both as a process and as a product. The teacher must plan. He should have a good notion of the issues the documentary seeks to explore, the procedures to be employed, and the expectations for each child.

Getting back to the newspaper article, it can be explored by a group of thirty-five fifth or sixth grade children in the following way. The class can be broken up into seven task forces of between four and six pupils each. Each task force can work on a manageable problem associated with the production of the documentary. Some of the tasks will be technical, and some will be oriented more towards production. Due to the fact that the production is a documentary, much of it will be in the interview format, so an effort will have to be made to provide variety by including at least one non-interview portion in the final production, and conducting the interviews in different ways. Much of the work of the task forces can, in this case, be suggested by direct quotations from the article.

Task Force One follows up on the following quotation. "And last week, Sally Ackerman of Etobicoke walked out of her local supermarket when she saw that the Sunday

roast she planned to serve cost $2.08 a pound." One way to find out more about why people are walking out of their supermarkets is to go to the supermarket with a portapak and talk to people, including the store manager.

The members of Task Force One will have to successfully complete the following jobs. Someone will need to write the store manager to ask his permission to videotape in his store and to invite him to be interviewed. A short list of groceries should be drawn up for on-the-spot, on-camera pricing. A list of questions for the store manager should be made up and submitted to him in advance so that he can be better prepared with answers. These questions might include:

1. Why have grocery prices risen so much recently?
2. Are people buying less meat now than they were before? Why or why not?
3. Are customers getting angry at the high prices?
4. What were the prices of the items we priced today one month ago? A year ago? (The Task Force can figure percentage increases over these periods of time).
5. What costs go into the price of a roast beef?

6. How much is a grocery item marked up each time it changes hands?

7. How much does this store mark up its groceries?

Someone needs to make up a list of required equipment and supplies and make sure that they are on hand when needed. Title cards and credits have to be designed and constructed. A plan is needed that details the videotaping procedures and shows the sequence of events to take place at the supermarket.

When the field trip takes place, the groceries selected for pricing are demonstrated and priced on-camera, the manager is interviewed more or less according to script, and randomly selected customers can be interviewed on an ad-lib basis. Back at school, the tape is replayed, analyzed, critiqued, and portions are selected for inclusion in the final edited version.

The children in this task force have, at the end of the exercise, been involved in many types of learning. They have exercised their writing and verbal skills. They have been involved in planning, organizing and problem-solving. They have interacted with an important member of the community outside the school. They have learned about food distribution. They have sharpened their questioning skills, and have gained further

mastery of the art of visual communication. They have used mathemetics. They have engaged in information retrieval, transmission and communication. They have used the graphic arts. They have subjected themselves to self-analysis and self-criticism. They have collaborated with their peers. And, in the group, they have been involved in a selection/rejection process through which they have had to make judgements, compromises, collective decisions. They have had to distinguish the significant from the insignificant. In interviewing the supermarket customers without a script, they have creatively and extemporaneously improvised.

Task Forces Two and Three take the following quotation as a starting point. "The two pounds of hamburger in Dorothy Mason's freezer are the last bits of beef that she and her five children expect to see for some time. 'I just got myself a vegetarian cookbook. We've eliminated meat,' said Mrs Mason." The pupils in Task Force Two act first. They need to figure out how to contact Mrs. Mason. (They can do this through the writer of the article at the newspaper's main office). Then somebody has to phone Mrs. Mason, inviting her to the school "studio" to talk about her family's new diet, her cookbook, and meatless recipes.

Assuming that she accepts the invitation, and she probably will, the planning begins for the videotaping session in the studio. Mrs. Mason should be asked mail in a copy of a meatless recipe she would like to discuss so that it can be graphically reproduced in large letters for on-camera display. She should be consulted in the planning of studio arrangements and asked if she could contribute for display some food substitutes for meat.

As the day of the interview approaches, the studio (which can be set up either in the classroom or elsewhere) should be blocked out on paper. Props should be selected and the graphic work for titles, credits and illustrations completed. The school principal should be notified and invited to the taping session. A script has to be written to include not only the spoken parts but also the camera directions for the production Director who works apart from the camerapeople and talent behind room dividers or in another room. Director and talent must familiarize themselves with the script, and children doing the technical work must, of course, learn to operate the equipment.

Questions for Mrs. Mason can be brainstormed and selected by the whole group. They might include:

1. Why are you eliminating meat entirely? Why don't you just cut down?
2. Do you think that anything can be done to bring down the price of meat enough so you would buy it again? If so, what?
3. Does meat have any particular food value that cannot be found in other foods?
4. What non-meat foods contain the kinds of nutrition that would be found in meat?
5. Are there cookbooks for people who want to eat meatless meals? Which one(s) do you recommend? Where can they be obtained?
6. Can you describe one of your meatless recipes?

On the day of Mrs. Mason's visit, the kids set up the studio with the appropriate furniture, displays, illustrations and equipment according to the plan that has already been made. Mrs. Mason is interviewed according to script. Hopefully by that time, the script will be familiar enough to the interviewer so that it does not have to be read. The children should be encouraged to be flexible in their interpretations of the script, and to follow the gist of the conversation, rather than the script, where appropriate. Memorized scripts usually end in disaster.

After the interview, Mrs. Mason can be invited to view the replay with the children and the teacher, and to participate in the analysis, critiquing, and the editing process. Following this, she can be introduced to other children and shown around the classroom and the school. Cookies and cocoa might be served. In any case, the guest should be made to feel glad that she came, and that she contributed something of value.

The learning benefits to the members of Task Force Two are similar to those of the first task force. There are, however, some differences. Task Force Two has brought a community human resource into the school rather than the other way around. Television studio work involves a more precise degree of task interaction than does work with the portapak. And finally, the children in this task force have refined their social graces by acting as hosts to an honored guest.

The activities of the remaining task forces will be described briefly. Task Force Three, taking its cue from the same quotation as Task Force Two, plans and conducts an on-camera cooking lesson previously discussed by Mrs. Mason. This is done in the studio. All the ordinary television production jobs must be performed. In addition, a trip to the grocery store needs to be

made to price and purchase the required ingredients. As an optional task, prices of ingredients for a meat recipe of equivalent food value might be investigated and reported. Some of the props and graphics used by the Task Force Two kids can also be used here.

"But Mrs. Mason's children . . . are not too enthused." Task Force Four starts from this quotation. Two of Mrs. Mason's children are invited to the TV studio to present their views on the new meatless regime. These guests can respond to questions posed by the pupils and to the comments made by Mrs. Mason on her part of the program. The atmosphere should be very relaxed, and the script loose, to reflect the informality that usually characterizes conversations among age peers. Despite the informality, the Director and the interviewers should have a firm grasp on the kinds of information they wish to elicit from their guests. Mrs. Mason's children, like Mrs. Mason herself, participate in the playback process, and are shown around the school.

"Free recipes for economical dishes are available from Mrs. Ethel Beamish's office." (Mrs. Beamish is a nutritionist with the Metro Toronto Department of Social Services). Task Force Five arranges to visit Mrs. Beamish at her office for a portapak interview.

Public servants and politicians are not likely to turn down this sort of request, especially when it comes from elementary school children. The procedures for this portion of the documentary are very similar to those undertaken by the members of Task Force One. The children's questions might center on ways the consumer can economize on food, the services that Mrs. Beamish and her department can render to the public, what categories of people are hurt most by the food cost squeeze, and what can be done to bring prices down.

Task Force Six draws a member from each of the other five task forces for final documentary editing. The five groups elect or appoint their representatives in whatever manner they wish. The responsibility of this group is make a coherent and attractive package from the portions of videotape already recorded. Music must be chosen for dubbing onto the audio track of the final product. The children in this task force must collaborate, make judgements, compromise and select; in short, they become group decision-makers. Once the final decisions have been made about the edited content of the documentary, this group undertakes the task of electronically transferring the various portions of tape previously recorded onto a master tape. They also dub in whatever

audio they have selected. This process is painstaking and time consuming; it will need to be broken down into manageable portions of time. The kids themselves can operate the editing machines, but competent adult technical help should be on call at all times, as a relatively simple mistake can ruin a tape. When the final product is ready, it is shown to the entire class for criticism. At this point, very little can be done to change the program, so the teacher should try to ensure that the criticism is constructive and directed towards a future production.

Task Force Seven acts as the publicity committee. Once the teacher has made specific arrangements with the local cable television company to broadcast the tape, the kids in this group launch a major promotional campaign. A form letter for distribution to interested individuals and institutions should be drafted and then written on a ditto master for duplication and distribution. A member of the group will have to see that a mailing list is drawn up. Envelopes will need to be addressed, stuffed and mailed. Another child will have to go to the post office to buy stamps. Posters can be created from newsprint and poster board with paints, magic markers, etc., for posting in and out of school. The task force might wish to arrange "speaking engagements" to other schools where they can talk to

their peers about their TV program, and perhaps show a small portion of the tape as a "preview." The initial contacts for these visits can be made by the children themselves through the principals of the schools to be visited. If this is done by letter, each one should be individually written.

Only thirty of the thirty-five children in the class have been accounted for. Our experience has shown us that most, but not all, children are eager to participate in this sort of a project. Those who are not should not be forced; they can be drawn into future projects if they wish later on.

Anyone from outside the school who is invited to participate should be told how his or her contribution will fit into the whole project. Those who actually do participate should be written thank-you notes by the children.

Equipment and supplies

What follows is a list of equipment and supplies required by the members of each task force. It assumes that equipment for a modest, half-inch television studio is available. Most of the tasks described above, however, can be performed on a less sophisticated level with a single camera video portapak, a tripod, and an extension microphone.

Not including standard school supplies, Task Force One will require:

1. A half-hour, half-inch videotape
2. Video portapak
3. Small TV monitor
4. Alternating current (AC) adapter
5. Tripod, preferably a dolly tripod
6. Three hour battery pack (optional)
7. Camera shoulder brace (optional)
8. Radio frequency (RF) adapter
9. Extension microphone and adequate cable
10. School letterhead
11. Supplies for making graphics

Task Force Two will need equipment for use in a studio.

1. A half-hour, half-inch videotape
2. EIAJ standard videotape recorder
3. Two portapak cameras
4. Two tripods
5. Two camera adapters so that portapak cameras can be used with the EIAJ standard videotape recorder
6. Camera switcher or special effects generator
7. Three small TV monitors
8. Desk microphone

9. Video and audio connecting cables
10. Room dividers
11. Props and furnishings for scudio
12. Supplies for making graphics
13. School letterhead

Task Force Three will have the same requirements as Task Force Two, plus:

1. Recipe ingredients
2. Money to buy recipe ingredients
3. Kitchen utensils
4. Smocks and/or aprons

Task Force Four will require the same materials as Task Force Two, except that the studio furnishings will be a little different.

Task Force Five will be using a portapak in Mrs. Beamish's office. This group's needs will be similar to those of Task Force One, except that a stationary tripod will be more appropriate than a dolly tripod.

Task Force Six will need:

1. A raw, master half-inch, half-hour videotape
2. EIAJ standard videotape recorder
3. EIAJ standard videotape recorder with editing capacity
4. Record player and/or audiotape recorder

5. Two TV monitors
6. Audio and video connecting cables
7. The videotapes made by the first five task forces
8. A quiet, enclosed room

Task Force Seven's requirements for its publicity campaign will be as follows:

1. Ditto machine
2. Ditto masters
3. School letterhead
4. Envelopes
5. Money to buy stamps
6. Newsprint pads
7. Supplies for making graphics
8. Portapak playback deck
9. Large TV monitor (21 or 23 inch)
10. Alternating current (AC) adapter
11. Access to a telephone

Getting the show broadcast

Cable television systems in North America vary in almost every respect imaginable. Some teachers will have to approach the local cable entrepreneur to get his pupils' tapes broadcast, others will have to go through municipal government channels, and still others will

make their contacts with local school officials. Some cable operators will be reluctant to broadcast children's half-inch videotapes because they will not look "professional" enough, a dubious argument at best. Most cable systems are technically capable of broadcasting half-inch videotape over their systems. A determined teacher will usually be able to persuade most cable systems to carry the tapes he presents. The public relations benefit that accrues to the cable company that provides such access far outstrips any possible disadvantage. There is strength in numbers. If you meet with resistance, form a committee. Enlist the aid of your principal, your superintendent, your mayor, your school board trustees. You will win in the end. Choose broadcast times that are convenient for your target audience, and try to get each program broadcast at least three or four times.

There are still many North American communities without cable television. This should not dissuade interested teachers from using video in the classroom; there are many ways of disseminating the kids' work without cable television. Productions can be broadcast over a local school's closed-circuit television system or, if there is none, a playback deck can be

carted from room to room. Tapes can be shown at PTA meetings, in other schools, or at special community screenings. They can be exchanged by mail. Although cable television is not required, it helps a great deal, and teachers in communities without it should collectively begin lobbying at the local levels of government for the establishment of responsive cable TV systems.

Displaying a child-produced program to the community through regular and established community media channels is a fully appropriate way to consummate a community-based television project. It gives the community insights into the lives and schools of its children. More important, it gives the children a sense of full membership in a community which cares enough about them to broadcast their work throughout the whole town.